

Housing the historical bloc: Civil society contestation of authoritarian neoliberalism in England

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Abstract

Neoliberalisation, particularly since the financial crisis, has been associated with significant housing crises. Rising prices and rents have benefitted asset owners, whilst squeezing younger generations out of the ‘property owning democracy’. As the tensions between these two groups grow, states are seeking further reforms to urban planning to deliver greater levels of private house-building, as a policy fix which also serves the interests of capital. To deliver further neoliberal reforms, though, states are increasingly turning towards more authoritarian practices to manage growing dissent to neoliberal rule. Drawing on Gramsci and theoretical insights from the major crises of the 1970s, this paper analyses how authoritarian practices, statist and populist, are derived from the administrative and legitimisation crises that followed the financial crash of 2007/8. It focuses on a particular administrative crisis – housing in England – to show how increasingly coercive urban planning practices were advocated for at national level, which in turn revealed tensions within the ‘historical bloc’ of the neoliberal order. In the English case the government has struggled to cohere the consent of capital and civil society, with key class fractions of the historical bloc divided over planning reform. I argue that the contestations have nonetheless shifted political common sense towards reducing deliberative and democratic practices, shifting accountability from those with structural power to those with much more marginal power.

Keywords

housing, neoliberalism, populism, urban planning

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摘要

新自由主义化与重大的住房危机有关，特别是金融危机以来。不断上涨的房价和租金让资产所有者受益，却将年轻一代排除在了“财产所有制民主”之外。随着这两个人群之间的紧张关系加剧，各国正在寻求通过城市规划的进一步改革，提高私人住宅建设水平，而这一政策修正也符合资本的利益。然而，为了进一步推行新自由主义改革，各国越来越多地转而采取更加专制的做法，以管理对新自由主义统治日益增长的不满。本文借鉴葛兰西（Gramsci）的理论以及关于 20 世纪 70 年代的重大危机的理论见解，分析了国家主义和民粹主义的威权主义做法如何源于 2007–2008 年金融危机后的行政危机和合法化危机。本文重点关注一场特殊的行政危机—英格兰的住房—以展示国家层面如何提倡越来越强制性的城市规划实践，这反过来又揭示了新自由主义秩序“历史集团”内部的紧张关系。在英国，政府一直在努力争取资本和公民社会的一致意见，而历史集团中的关键阶级派别在规划改革上存在分歧。尽管如此，本文认为，争议已经从政治常识转向减少协商和民主实践，从对那些拥有结构性权力者的问责，转向对那些拥有更多边际权力者问责。

关键词

住房、新自由主义、民粹主义、城市规划

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Introduction

The decade of the 2010s was bookended by the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. The former marked the collapse of blind faith in lightly regulated markets and globalisation as articulated by ‘third way’, ‘progressive’ neoliberals, whereas the latter exposed the failure of many nations to invest in public services as a consequence of the austerity programmes that spanned the decade. Both events required major public spending as a crisis response. Amidst these two major events, the structural weaknesses in both capitalist political economy and social reproduction have also become evident in the related but slower burning crisis of housing. Financialised, debt-driven models of housing provision are driving up prices to levels many workers struggle to afford, diminishing socially reproductive capacity with increasing homelessness and insecurity stifling people’s lives.

Neither these cataclysmic crisis moments nor the slower burning crisis of housing have

led to a significant departure from neoliberalism as the dominant ideology of the state and global institutions. Instead, the state practices of privatisation, endless re-regulation, marketisation and restrictions on trade unions are increasingly bolstered through more authoritarian and illiberal forms of governance as a means of defending and/or extending neoliberalisation (Arsel et al., 2021; Bruff and Tansel, 2019).

In recent years, both deeply neoliberalised and neoliberalising states have turned to more centralised and executive-led decision making, as well as the targeting of religious, ethnic and LGBT+ minorities by the state and news media and punitive crackdowns on political rights and dissent which restricts democratic contestation (Brown, 2019; Peck and Theodore, 2019). Right wing parties and groups target the progressive gains made by social movements and instituted by the more ‘progressive’ neoliberal political parties through the 1990s and 2000s (Fraser, 2017).

Urban governance, and specifically urban planning, has been no exception to this turn, with local states increasingly stripped of funding and powers whilst facing greater pressure on their welfare functions (Peck, 2012). Securing new developments, built in the interests of finance and developer capital rather than citizens, faces increased resistance which is met with increased state repression (Tansel, 2019) as central governments take greater control of managing urban and environmental planning functions (Ergenc and Yuksekkaya, 2024, Fearn and Davoudi, 2022).

This paper contributes to the literature on authoritarian neoliberalism in urban governance, by analysing a highly contested (and failed) set of reforms for urban planning in England which were putatively aimed at addressing the housing crisis. What the paper shows, drawing on Gramsci and Fraser, is that as the *administrative crisis* of housing has engulfed not just the working class but those in the professional middle classes too, as the government attempted to centralise planning functions and reduce deliberation within the English planning system in an attempt to stimulate private housebuilding.

Doing so, however, opened up a conflict within civil society between two class fractions within the historical bloc of neoliberal rule. The younger, professional class fraction is increasingly opposed, at least in political discourse, to older, wealthier homeowners.¹ Proponents of the planning reforms articulated an ‘authoritarian populism’ (Hall, 1985) which identified so-called ‘NIMBYs’ (not in my back yard) as the root of the housing crisis, however, this led to the government facing a *legitimation crisis* by antagonising the older homeowners fraction without delivering any significant reform.

The first section of the paper discusses neoliberalism and the housing crisis. The second section outlines the Gramscian theoretical framework in relation to housing and

urban governance. The third analyses the *Planning for the Future* white paper which proposed the reforms, its contestation and the debates following its failure to become legislation. The final section highlights how the turn towards more authoritarian state practices develops from attempts to maintain a fragile hegemony of neoliberal governance, caught between competing class fractions in the historical bloc which are mobilised as both drivers of, and barriers to, authoritarian neoliberalism. The civil society contestation, and the way it has shifted political common sense towards further neoliberal reforms, suits the interests of developers and rentiers without addressing the substantive crisis.

(Authoritarian) Neoliberalism and the housing crisis

Housing provision, particularly in urban areas, has been a key area of reform and contestation for neoliberal governments. The dream originally sold by neoliberals was one of mass home-ownership, the ‘property owning democracy’, not only because of the opportunities this creates for financial institutions but as a means of inculcating individualism and ensuring citizens have a ‘stake’ in society (Forrest and Hirayama, 2015), and, by 2005, 70% of UK households were owner-occupied (Taylor, 2022).

That high watermark, though, masked a slowly developing housing crisis. Since then, housing across all forms of tenure has become increasingly insecure and expensive with home ownership decreasing to around 63% today – replaced by a growing private rental sector. This change has occurred *because of*, rather than in spite of, the pursuit of the neoliberal housing dream. The ‘right to buy’ social housing policy, for example, did lead to an increase of properties for sale in the private sector, but many of these properties (around 40%) fell into

the hands of private landlords. Social homes that were sold off were often not replaced, and programmes of 'urban renewal' displaced working-class communities from social housing estates with local authorities restricted from building new homes (Cooper et al., 2020; Murie, 2016).

Further, house prices were driven up by the greater financialisation of housing through the opening up of mortgage products delivered by a wider range of financial institutions, and the further opening up of financial markets led to the securitisation of mortgages into complex financial instruments (Whitehead and Williams, 2011). Despite this boost in demand, however, private housebuilding did not meet the shortfall created by the local authority sector facing financial as well as legislative restrictions on the central role it played in housebuilding for much of the 20th century (Robertson, 2016).

Thus, even by the 2007/8 financial crisis, there was already a problem of rising rents and house prices and a lack of new social housing with many councils semi-privatising their provision into housing associations (Morrison, 2017). When the financial crisis hit, triggered of course by mortgage defaults, the problems with housing became much more evident and began to affect more and more people in the UK and across the world (Aalbers et al., 2021; Gallent, 2016). With wages either stagnating or declining since the crash, private rents and house prices have continued to rise more than earnings (particularly in larger cities). Of course, those who maintained ownership of (or were still able to buy) their housing benefitted from these rises, whereas those looking to buy housing struggle to do so. More people in England are now living in private rental accommodation than social housing and are paying out increasing proportions of their income on rent, with those on lower incomes in part supported by housing welfare payments (Gallent, 2016).

Unsurprisingly, housing was articulated as in 'crisis' in the post-crash period. Rising homelessness, particularly rough sleeping, led to public pressure on government from charities and progressive political groups. Furthermore, the initial slowdown in credit flows following the financial crisis undermined the housing sector which meant that the construction industry lobbied the government for support and reform (Gallent, 2016). What emerged was a narrative, from government and thinktanks, that the housing crisis was caused by a shortage of housing supply due to the 'red tape' and planning restrictions which limited private housebuilding (Heslop and Ormerod, 2020).

Even with this narrative, the government recognised that housing was a significant *administrative crisis*. As Fraser argues, drawing on Habermas, an administrative crisis is one in 'which public powers lack the necessary heft to govern effectively' (Fraser, 2015: 165) as a consequence of 'capitalism's drive to endless accumulation [which] tends to destabilize the very public power it relies on' (Fraser, 2015: 159). With both the financial crisis and housing crisis, though, there is a question of who is to blame. For the financial crisis, the Conservative party were successful in attributing responsibility to the previous government, targeting the 'third way', 'progressive neoliberal' (Fraser, 2015) Labour government for their supposed financial profligacy.

Establishing this narrative allowed for the deepening of neoliberal reforms through austerity – privatisation, re-regulation and de-regulation, commodification – with the supposed aim of re-invigorating economic activity (Peck and Theodore, 2019). The extraordinary interventions to bailout financial institutions were not available to the public, instead they provided the rationale for neoliberalised states 'hollowing out *themselves* through a battery of austerity measures' (Peck and Theodore, 2019: 257,

emphasis in original), creating an ‘austerity urbanism’ which inflicts:

social and environmental externalities on cities and communities, while at the same time enforcing unflinching fiscal restraint by way of extra-local disciplines; they further incapacitate the state and the public sphere through the outsourcing, marketization and privatization of governmental services and social supports. (Peck, 2012: 650)

Austerity is intertwined with the housing crisis. Rather than empowering local authorities to deliver housing using historically low interest rates, local councils were made to bear the brunt of budget cuts to the point where many now face effective bankruptcy (Davies and Blanco, 2017; Farnsworth, 2021).

Unsurprisingly, these authorities have struggled to deliver and maintain social housing in this context, and they are increasingly unable to manage their administrative functions too (Fearn, 2024). Local planning authorities faced the brunt of the significant budget cuts (over 50% in many cases) and have outsourced significant amounts of their planning responsibilities (Slade et al., 2019). The outcome has been the growth of ‘urban development machines’, networks of public and private actors in which consultancies fill the gap between the central state and the local level left by the rolling back of Labour’s regional, public–private partnership planning (Raco et al., 2016). The introduction of central government housing targets and the ‘standard method’ for housing delivery has put further pressure on councils and led to significant amounts of effectively ‘unplanned’ development (Shepherd et al., 2023).

Simultaneously, however, the government put pressure on local *planning* authorities to deliver greater levels of private housebuilding. With burdensome regulations identified as the root of the administrative crisis in housing, the Conservative and Liberal

Democrat Coalition set about a series of reforms to address the problem on these terms. Their Localism Act (2011) did see a drive to remove England’s discretionary, plan-led system altogether, but internally the Conservatives resolved for the compromise position of a more centralised and de-regulated system which maintained some local controls (Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2018), with a National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) developed by a small number of ‘practitioners’, based on a ‘presumption in favour’ of sustainable development (Slade, 2018).

Just as significantly, the Coalition reforms included the abolition of the technocratic apparatus of housing delivery even for the private sector: Regional Spatial Strategies, Regional Assemblies and Regional Development Agencies (Baker and Wong, 2013). Further to planning reform, the Coalition government introduced government backed mortgages which increased access to credit but simultaneously inflated house values (Hammond, 2022), as well as the de-regulation of planning and housing construction, the impacts of which were writ large in the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire (Hodkinson, 2018).

Cumulatively, these reforms were consistent with typical neoliberal urban governance: reduced planning policy and building regulations as a form of de-regulation, with the effective removal of the regional bodies and cuts to local authorities amounting to a sort of shadow centralisation (see Thornley, 2018 on similar reforms in the 1980s). These changes, combined with the demand side policy of government backed mortgages and a period of historic low interest rates, exacerbated the housing crisis, benefitting buy-to-let landlords, institutional investors in real estate and existing homeowners whose access to cheap credit (Mills et al., 2019; Paccoud, 2017) allowed them to drive up prices and rents which in turn made accessing housing

more difficult for the younger and less well-off in each type of tenancy.

Consequently, the administrative crisis of housing has gotten measurably worse since 2010. The average house price increased by 14.3% in England from 2021 to 2022, rising 76% from 2012 to 2022 (Taylor, 2022). Real terms pay, however, remained below 2008 levels (Resolution Foundation, 2022). There are significant regional differences in housing costs, with London's housing crisis the most acute, but every region except one in England had rental costs deemed 'unaffordable' for those on lower incomes by the Office for National Statistics (Pateman and Richardson, 2022). The amount of people 'rough sleeping' increased by 165% between 2010 and 2018 (Crisis, 2019), as public housing provision declined year on year (Hill, 2022).

Thus, the housing crisis is one that has developed through the very prescriptions of neoliberal rule. The privatisation and financialisation of housing, the de-regulation of finance which led to the crash, the austerity that followed, the shift (in the Global North) from productivism to rentierism (Christophers, 2022), and the downwards pressure on wages, have all contributed to the housing crisis today.

We have yet to see a significant shift away from such prescriptions. Instead, successive governments have acted to secure and reiterate neoliberal governance through increasingly authoritarian means (Bruff and Tansel, 2019). States:

have increasingly relied on a constellation of legal, administrative and coercive state apparatuses to both legitimize and shield themselves from political and social contestation. (Bruff and Tansel, 2019: 239)

Rather than substantively change course, which would likely mean challenging those who have benefitted from the upwards

wealth redistribution of the last decades, states have rolled out authoritarian practices which limit dissent and ensure the continuity of neoliberal policymaking. Such authoritarian practices, Glasius (2018) argues, are a means of 'sabotaging accountability' for the multiple crises the UK and other nations face.

There are two dimensions to authoritarian neoliberalism, 'authoritarian statism' and 'authoritarian populism', both of which refer to practices which sabotage accountability. Poulantzas (2014) identified authoritarian statism as the extension of coercive central state power in a period of globalisation – which undermined the sovereignty of nation-states. According to Jessop (2011), Poulantzas highlighted:

the growing autonomy of the executive, the increased importance of presidential or prime ministerial powers, the consolidation of authoritarian, plebiscitary parties that largely represent the state to the popular masses. (Jessop, 2011: 52)

The extension of central state power is, crucially, driven by the need to intervene in administrative crises which result from the increased ease with which capital can flow globally.

Authoritarian populism, from Hall (1985), refers to how neoliberal governments gained consent by combining these neoliberal policies with targeting particular enemies (migrants, ethnic minorities, trade unions, political activists, LGBT + people) as the cause of economic and social malaise (see also, Kundnani, 2021). Early (elected) neoliberal leaders such as Thatcher and Reagan promised to sweep away these enemies, taking on the unions and strengthening law and order and carceral justice in the name of the honest, hard working 'people' while overseeing de-industrialisation.

In the present conjuncture, authoritarian populism has been re-invigorated through

the use of social media combined with the continued support of the established right-wing and liberal press (Mondon and Winter, 2020). New and established right-wing parties have gained power through articulating similar enemies of ‘the people’ as above, with immigrants, transgender people and religious minorities (particularly Muslims) articulated as the source of social problems.

The resurgence of authoritarian populism is a response to a profound *legitimation crisis* ‘in which public opinion turns against a dysfunctional system that fails to deliver’ (Fraser, 2015: 165), evident in the initial wave of protests and urban social movements that followed the financial crisis across the world and which in some cases found expression in established political parties – like the UK Labour party. Both these emergent movements, and the established progressive parties, have been targeted as ‘enemies’ – along with minority groups.

Scholarship has begun to address the specific urban dimensions of authoritarian neoliberalism. There has been an increased use of coercive, central state power within urban governance (Arsel et al., 2021; Ergenc and Yuksekkaya, 2024) in more developmentalist states to expand both neoliberal policy and drive forward state-backed projects. As Fearn and Davoudi (2022) argue, there has been a tendency towards more authoritarian statist practices in English planning since the ‘Localism’ reforms discussed above. ‘Written ministerial statements’, which can be issued without debate or vote in Parliament, are increasingly used as significant ‘material considerations’ in the planning process (Fearn, 2022), centralising powers and diminishing deliberative processes. A similar bypassing of deliberative planning practices occurs with the expanded use of ‘Permitted Development Rights’ (PDR) (Fearn et al., 2021).

What this paper analyses is the use of authoritarian populism as a means of legitimating statist reforms. In the English case,

the government has struggled to legitimate further neoliberal reforms, as they were perceived to threaten the interests of those within the *historical bloc* who have benefitted from the asset price inflationary effects of neoliberal urban governance.

Housing the historical bloc: A crisis of legitimation

As Shepherd et al. (2023) argue, the Conservative party has been riven by its own internal tensions which are evident in their attempts at planning reform. More radical neoliberal reforms were held back by those within the Party representing the more conservative tradition of urban containment during the creation of the Localism Act and NPPF. What Shepherd et al. show is that the incremental adjustments since (PDRs, standard method) are evidence of continued reforms being delivered whilst managing the tensions in the Conservative ranks – maintaining *hegemony* through incremental statecraft rather than a dramatic moment of radical change.

Such an incremental approach is also evident in Penny (2017), who argues that there has been a gradual rebalancing between ‘consent’ (often through forms of participatory governance) to the more coercive power of ‘administrative domination’ (Davies, 2014) driven by budget cuts limiting the scope of local authorities to act and increasingly favouring the development industry, consistent with the discussion above. These more authoritarian statist shifts are legitimated by the *common sense* of ‘austrian realism’ (Davies et al., 2020) which local government actors and others in *civil society* use to legitimate accepting and delivering public sector cuts and failing to provide adequate services.

What I offer here is a further Gramscian analysis, but one that draws primarily on the second of the italicised terms above – *civil society* – and relatedly the concept of the *historical bloc*. Understanding hegemony

as ‘a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria’ (Gramsci, 2003: 182), this paper identifies the problems the Conservative government now faces in maintaining an increasingly fractious bloc of class interests. The historical bloc, for Gramsci, refers to both the economic interests of classes (and class fractions) as well as the political level in which these interests combine (Hall et al., 1978: 47). The contestation between more dominant and subordinate interests is the terrain of civil society, the sphere in which private and public interests are made clear to the state. The ruling historical bloc exercises hegemony through the state but requires the consent of at least some sections of civil society – often represented through particular *intellectuals* – as well as through power within, for example, the sphere of production. Civil society intellectuals draw on and shape the common sense of politics and their own class.

The concept of the historical bloc is particularly useful because it can help identify one of the key problems for the government – the tensions between the class fractions within the bloc. As Shepherd et al. (2023) show, although the Localism compromise maintained support of construction as well as finance capital, the need to increase housebuilding led to incremental changes made to bypass local government – which have progressively antagonised the other side of the compromise within the bloc – the wealthier homeowners and the backbench MPs who represent them. These older, wealthier homeowners have, as we shall see below, increasingly come to question whether the government is representing their material and aesthetic interests.

Further, maintaining the compromise has largely been at the expense of younger workers, who are unable to buy housing and face rising private rents and difficulty accessing social housing. Milburn (2019) identifies

differing experiences of housing as a reason for the growing generational differences in political views. The Conservative government have thus been struggling to plot a course between the rentiers (Christophers, 2022) which dominate the British economy, their core middle-class voting base and reproducing that base in the younger middle and working classes that face rising housing costs. The contestation over planning is one in which civil society actors are articulating the interests of these two fractions of the middle classes – those which the state is trying to find a means to satisfy alongside the interests of capital (i.e. for profits and rents from real estate development).

Due in large part to the multiplicity of crises faced and the stagnation of the economy, the government has been unable to find the set of regulatory and institutional practices for housing and urban governance that can serve all these interests. As I show below, the government and proponents of neoliberal planning reform have turned to authoritarian populist rhetoric to identify the enemies within that are preventing the younger middle classes achieve the dream of home-ownership. Such rhetoric has been utilised in other contexts to extend state power in urban governance (Dürr, 2023).

What the analysis in the paper shows is how an attempt to drive through wholesale neoliberal planning reforms, which had an authoritarian statist dimension, failed because the authoritarian populist positioning as well as the content of the reforms challenged the interests of the older homeowners class fraction. The contestation of the reforms though, has shifted political common sense, with the opposition Labour party taking up some of the ideas and the focus on planning liberalisation as a means of reproducing a new generation of middle-class homeowners – that is, to reconstitute the historical bloc through further neoliberalisation.

Silencing the noisy minority: The Planning for the Future white paper

The *Planning for the Future* white paper was published in August 2020. It proposed an overhaul of the English planning system, by introducing a rules-based zoning system instead of the discretionary process in place since 1947, with simplified policies and plans, as well as an ‘open-data’ system based on a new housing algorithm to match supply to demand.

The Conservative leadership were likely aware their third attempt (they had tried in 1986 as well as in 2011) at neoliberal reform of the planning system would face significant resistance from some of their core supporters. Their 2019 election manifesto did not identify a substantial overhaul of planning, simply the promise to ‘make the planning system simpler for the public and small builders’ (Conservative and Unionist Party, 2019: 31) as part of a drive to increase rates of housebuilding. To attempt to gain consent for the reforms, the government and its ideological allies utilised authoritarian populist rhetoric which identified the enemy within gaming the system – the NIMBY.

The blueprint for the reforms was set out in a report from the influential neoliberal think-tank *Policy Exchange*, ‘Rethinking the planning system for the 21st century’ (Airey and Doughty, 2020), published a month after the 2019 election. The report laid out a series of de-regulatory, centralising reforms to planning which promised to free up land markets from political blockages. The foreword, from economist Edward Glaesser, set out a problematisation of the current state of crisis:

Capitalism seems to be failing the young, both in the U.S. and the U.K., because the system has increasingly come to favour insiders over outsiders. (Airey and Doughty, 2020: 6)

The insiders in this vision, though, are not rentier capitalists or political elites, instead

Glaesser highlights ‘tenure contracts’ and ‘occupational licensing’ as well as ‘land use restrictions’ as demarcating those inside from those out (Airey and Doughty, 2020). The *Policy Exchange* report itself specifically identifies the (intended) beneficiaries of the last few decades of planning and housing policy as also being one of the very barriers to liberalisation – the ‘noisy minority’ who are opposed to the ‘silent majority’ (Airey and Doughty, 2020: 34). The ‘noisy minority’ are those who participate in planning decisions and are ‘typically older people and homeowners’ (Airey and Doughty, 2020: 9) with the time and resources to get involved, which means the planning system puts ‘control in the hands of objectors rather than “the people”’ (Airey and Doughty, 2020: 37) that is, the ‘silent majority’.

The report claims that the planning system has ‘little relevance to the country’s 21st century liberalised economy’, and that ‘the state has substituted itself for the price mechanism in land markets’ (Airey and Doughty, 2020: 7). The level of control within planning means that ‘the process by which places naturally change has been wholly disrupted’ yet also that the ‘tight rationing of housing land has caused significant increases in housing costs and housing equity’ (Airey and Doughty, 2020: 9). Both the authors of the report were soon hired as government advisors, one specifically to work on implementing planning reform (Quinn, 2020).

Between the publication of the report and the white paper the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the UK. Prime Minister Boris Johnson used the economic slowdown that resulted to frame planning reform as essential to economic recovery – declaring the need to ‘Build Build Build’ in June 2020 and ‘using this crisis to finally to tackle this country’s great unresolved challenges of the last three decades’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 2020).

He promised to end ‘intergenerational injustice’ – identifying the tension within the historical bloc – with ‘the most radical reforms of our planning system since the end of the second world war’, which would reduce delays and build housing and infrastructure across the country to ‘to create the conditions for free market enterprise’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 2020).

The *Planning for the Future* white paper which followed set out the proposals for a ‘rules based system’ based on assigning land into three zones: Growth (automatic approval within rules); Renewal (some development permitted); and Protected (heavily restricted development) (MHCLG, 2020: 24). The inclusion of the third ‘protected zone’ was a concession to the Conservative base, bolstered by the focus on ‘design codes’ and ‘building beautiful’ (MHCLG, 2020: 21). A revised NPPF would centrally define planning policy, with local plans assigning the three zones and ‘clear rules for what can and cannot be done’ (MHCLG, 2020: 10). As an extension of privatisation and outsourcing, the white paper also proposed an overhaul of the mapping and ‘open data’ used within planning, driven by ‘PropTech’ entrepreneurs (MHCLG, 2020: 16), and alongside the paper a new algorithm was announced to allocate housing.

The *Policy Exchange* report and the white paper both draw upon an authoritarian-populist identification of the enemies to growth, towards which the present planning system is too permissive. In both the report and the white paper there is a shared problematisation of the housing crisis as one in which ‘the people’ are prevented from accessing housing due to the ‘a small minority of voices’ (MHCLG, 2020: 20). Public participation in planning is therefore framed as a barrier to the popular will, as it favours those who have materially benefitted from the asset-price inflation that consecutive governments have actively encouraged.

Accountability for the housing crisis is shifted from those with significant political and economic power to the figure of the ‘NIMBY’ utilising their much more marginal power.

The problem for the government, however, was that they were constructing an enemy out of those whose consent they relied upon to govern, perhaps emboldened by their large parliamentary majority and the notion that Brexit had allowed them to develop a new political base in the north of England. Thus, they sought to extend coercive state powers to those in civil society who were used to the government seeking their consent. Such a move was most likely required to drive through further neoliberal reforms. Unfortunately for the government, the ‘noisy minority’ soon made themselves heard.

A new legitimisation crisis: The noisy minority strike back

The initial reaction in the right-wing press emphasised the tensions in the historical bloc. *The Sun* described the reforms as a ‘Bonanza for Brickies’² (Cole, 2020). *The Sunday Times* practically reproduced the government press release in defence of the proposals (Shipman, 2020). *The Times* editorial on the day of release reproduced much of the ideological content of the Policy Exchange report, urging the Prime Minister to have the ‘political courage’ to challenge ‘the hang-ups of many voters in the Tories’ heartlands’ over the ‘sacred cow’ of the green belt (a zone around major cities that restricts development) (The Times, 2020).

The Conservatives also had support from capital. The press release accompanying the white paper contained supportive statements from developers like Gleason Homes, the Confederation of British Industry and Network Homes (MHCLG, 2020). Indeed, in the consultation on the paper, the Home

Builders Federation were concerned that the reforms did not go far enough, stating that they were ‘extremely concerned’ that local authorities could ‘seek to minimise the identification of growth areas’ (HBF, 2020) utilising what powers they would have left in plan-making. The proposed reforms, therefore, aligned the interests of capital with the aims of reproducing home ownership for the younger middle classes.

Despite the well-prepared propaganda offensive though, the concerns of grassroots Conservative support also soon became clear. The staunchly conservative *Daily Mail* newspaper warned its readers that the zoning proposal ‘opens the floodgates for housing development’ (Carr and Bucks, 2020). Conservative MPs were particularly concerned with what one termed the ‘mutant’ housing algorithm, which could lead to significant housebuilding in the rural constituencies around London (Swinford, 2020). Conservative councillors within Johnson’s and the planning minister Robert Jenrick’s own constituencies said that the plans were ‘worryingly naïve’ and that they ‘thought the proposals were a joke’ (Grylls, 2020). As a *Times* headline put it a few weeks after the release of the paper: ‘Tories fear building spree in the shires’ (Swinford, 2020) – with 80 Conservative MPs organising to reject the reforms (enough to block new legislation).

The reforms were also challenged by a range of civil society groups. The NGO Campaign to Protect Rural England, whose membership covers many Conservative voting areas, co-ordinated a response from 40 planning, housing and environmental groups. They highlighted the ‘loss of local democracy’ and the potential loss of ‘access to green spaces’ under the reforms (CPRE, 2020a). Alongside the environmental NGO Friends of the Earth, they coordinated a letter signed by 2062 local councillors against the reforms, which stated the proposals threatened ‘an unacceptable loss of local democracy,

scrutiny and accountability and worse outcomes for communities’ (CPRE, 2020b).

Professional bodies and academics also challenged the problematisation of the housing crisis and the proposals in the white paper. Academics argued that there was a ‘lack of evidence presented to support this central claim that democratic planning is causing a housing crisis’, and that the white paper consultation questions ‘skirt around this key issue of altering the role of local democracy’ (Bartlett School of Planning, 2020: 1–2). Planning’s professional body, the Royal Town Planning Institute, argued the white paper used ‘planner bashing rhetoric’ (Grimwood et al., 2022), and the Construction Industry Council (representing engineers and construction professionals) argued that the lack of affordable homes was due to the market being dominated by a few big firms and was ‘largely down to lack of government subsidy’ (CIC, 2020).

The divisions within Conservative support were made clear in a Parliamentary debate. Conservative MPs contested both the problem of housing and the solutions offered. Former Prime Minister Theresa May critiqued the logic of the reforms and the housing algorithm:

We do need, as I said, to build more homes, but we will not do that by forcing local authorities to grant more planning permissions to developers so that they can build more homes to bring the price down, because developers simply will not do it. (HC Deb, 8th October 2020)

And MP Jason McCartney called for more local discretionary power and regulation:

That is why I have deep concerns about the ‘Planning for the Future’ White Paper. We need more local control and democracy when it comes to developments. We need more protection for green spaces—not just green belt, but the green fields that give my village communities the much-needed green lungs. (HC Deb, 8th October 2020)

The debate showed that the white paper had little chance of passing through the legislative process without significant change, with so many Conservative MPs opposed, yet the government affirmed in May 2021 that a Planning Bill would be brought forward to ‘modernise the planning system, so that more homes can be built’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 2021). Within a month, the proposed reforms were rejected by the ‘noisy minority’. A by-election defeat for the Conservatives in the constituency of Chesham and Amersham showed that the Conservative MPs in Parliament were right to think that the proposed reforms were electorally toxic. Despite the Conservatives polling reasonably well nationally at the time, the Liberal Democrats managed to win the seat with a 25-point swing in their direction. One of the core local issues was planning reform. The Liberal Democrat Leader, Ed Davey, stated:

Above all here, actually, was the proposed planning reforms which will give so much power to developers and take away from communities and not result in the affordable housing people need. (Lowe, 2021)

Davey’s analysis was shared by Conservative former environment minister, Theresa Villiers (2021), who wrote in the conservative *The Daily Telegraph* that the loss was an ‘an opportunity to rethink their approach to planning reform’. In the same month, a cross-party committee of MPs also criticised the solutions offered by the government, with their report concluding that they were ‘unpersuaded that the Government’s zoning-based approach will produce a quicker, cheaper, and democratic planning system’ (Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2021: 99). The government admitted defeat in September 2021. The Minister who led on the reforms, Robert Jenrick, was removed from his

position, and the new Minister, Michael Gove, said the plans were ‘paused’ before they were officially ditched in May 2022 (Hammond et al., 2022).

The contestation of the white paper and by election-defeat, it turns out, was one of the first of many events in a wider legitimisation crisis for the government. Prime Minister Boris Johnson was forced out of office following allegations of government corruption and breaking of COVID lockdown rules, only to be replaced by Liz Truss whose ‘mini-budget’ led to a huge spike in interest rates and in turn the mortgage payments of the already antagonised home-owning base of the Conservative party.

We could conclude, then, that the further neoliberalisation of planning has failed. Not for the first time, the neoliberal wing of the Conservative party has attempted to sweep away what remains of the post-war planning system, only to be thwarted by the more conservative elements of their party and its supporters. As Peck and Theodore (2019) argue though, neoliberalism has a tendency to ‘fail forward’, and what I argue in the final section is that the authoritarian populist distinction drawn in this debate can still serve to deliver a more carefully articulated set of planning reforms.

Builders and blockers, YIMBYS and NIMYS, and a new common sense?

Since the failure of the white paper, advocates for planning liberalisation have continued to argue for reforms in line with the white paper proposals. The importance of the paper’s defeat in maintaining the consent of the historical bloc was emphasised in an article by Colville (2022), one of the authors of the 2019 Conservative manifesto, who described the rolling back on housing targets (above) as ‘spitting in the face of a generation’ with the explicit problem identified as

Tory MPs ‘removing any prospect of its [younger generations] members ever becoming homeowners and voting Tory’.

The continuity with the white paper contestation is the continued framing around the need for planning reform to reduce the power of the ‘NIMBY’. Scholars have critiqued the use of the term as lacking concrete analytical use, but it has widespread use in political discourse and everyday language (Burningham, 2000). Recently in England, it has been contrasted with the self-identification of the term ‘YIMBY’ (a US import) by individuals and groups who are campaigning for (amongst other things) planning reform to increase private housebuilding.

There is very little research on the ‘YIMBY’ phenomenon in England, but research from the US shows that YIMBY groups tend to be younger, professional workers who are unable to buy housing and/or are paying high rents in major cities (Tapp, 2021). They are often local grassroots groups, linked through social media (Davis and Huennekens, 2022), but have increasingly been able to influence US state and national legislation (Tapp, 2021). The groups express the frustration of this younger class fraction with the housing crisis, although the campaigns and reforms fought for often fall in line with orthodox neoliberal prescriptions, such as de-regulation and tax cuts, as the means of addressing rents and housing costs (Wyly, 2022).

The UK versions of such groups at a national level, frequently led by well networked graduates from elite universities, foreground planning reform as a means of resolving the housing crisis. *Priced Out* (a campaign group) and *Centre for Cities* (a thinktank funded by one of Labour’s biggest donors) identify the Town and Country Planning Act, that was enacted in 1947, as being responsible for the housing crisis by restricting private housebuilding (Spencer,

2023). What they advocate for is something like the proposals in the white paper, reducing discretionary powers within planning in favour of a zonal and regulatory system to significantly increase private housebuilding with the added possibility of some land value capture for social housing too. Thus, more progressive demands are integrated with minimising public power and deliberation.

What such groups do seem to have taken on is the authoritarian-populist positioning of the reforms. The binary between NIMBY/YIMBY has been reproduced in England with regards planning reform in recent years, with those identifying as the latter gaining the attention most activists groups can only dream of. For example, *Priced Out* state that they ‘fight for everyone who wants to be a homeowner but can’t afford to’, and the director of the group argued in *The Times* that the housing crisis ‘stems from nimbyism’ in an article titled ‘NIMBYS are the real reason your children can’t buy a house’ (Poser, 2023). These groups are the intellectuals of the frustrated younger middle classes, articulating reforms palatable to those in power as they do very little to challenge the financialisation of housing or upwards wealth redistribution.

Such groups have focused their campaigning and lobbying towards the opposition Labour Party, who have in turn made planning reform a focal point in their agenda, stating they are on the side of ‘builders, not the blockers’, in which the blockers are specifically identified as those who ‘enjoy the secure homes and jobs that they’re denying to others’ (Buchan, 2023), with the party leader declaring himself to be a ‘YIMBY’ who will ‘bulldoze’ planning regulations (Seddon and Francis, 2023).

At the time of writing, it is unclear how this rhetorical positioning will translate into concrete changes – most of the proposals made by Labour so far are not dramatically out of line with current government policy. The importance of these binaries (YIMBY/

NIMBY, builder/blocker) for this paper is that it shows the conflicts and crises that persist beyond the failure of the *Planning for the Future* reforms, as these divisions come to stand in for the interests of class fractions within the bloc – the younger professional classes and the older, wealthier homeowners.

The most significant outcome of the civil society contestation of planning is that it has helped to establish planning reform as the core problem to be overcome in the administrative crisis of housing. Thus, while we have not yet seen the dramatic centralisation of urban planning powers proposed in the white paper, the civil society contestation and the YIMBY/NIMBY distinction continue to make it possible to construct enemies of those exercising marginal powers rather than those with significant powers in housing and real estate (for example, institutional landlords). Which, of course, explains why the government would countenance antagonising their own base – as the alternative is challenging the interests of capital. Thus, through the contestation of planning, a housing crisis which developed through the various mal-interventions of neoliberal urban governance is in turn reconstructed as one *where there is an excess of public power*, to which the answer is, of course, extending typical neoliberal reforms that replace politics with markets, private power with public.

Urban planning, the historical bloc and authoritarian neoliberalism

The administrative crisis of housing is one that has developed through neoliberal urban governance. The privatisation of social housing, the reduced capacity of local government to develop and plan for housing (deepened through austerity), the increased financialisation of housing (e.g. securitised mortgage debt) and the increased, often speculative, international investment in real estate have

all contributed to the rise in house prices and rental costs. Combined with stagnant wages and significantly reduced power for labour, prices have increased well above what workers get paid. These changes have occurred across the world, with the UK a particularly acute example due to it pursuing much of the above to greater extremes than comparable nations.

Initially, the housing crisis impacted the less powerful. Those in social housing, migrants excluded from social housing in the private rental sector, and people struggling with mental health problems or addiction linked to poverty were the first to be impacted. Many working-class communities resisted, and continue to resist, the drive for unabated development and displacement in the current system, often through making use of what remains of democratic practices within – or connected to – urban planning (Heslop et al., 2023; Román-Velázquez, 2022).

I have argued here that the failed *Planning for the Future* reforms in England were an attempt to reduce accountability and dissent within and through urban planning, by significantly reducing local authority powers in favour of a more centralised system that replaced public deliberation (and planners) with digital technology fads and algorithmic decision making. Importantly, the case for such reforms was made through authoritarian-populist language, which identified ‘insiders’ and a ‘noisy minority’ gaming the system and failing the younger generations.

Ultimately, these reforms were defeated because they were seen to threaten the interests of wealthy homeowners and peri-urban conservatives who make up the core of Conservative Party support and who make up an important part of the historical bloc. What this case emphasises are some of the limitations of authoritarian state practices for securing the legitimacy and hegemony of neoliberal rule. Populist rhetoric and coercive state power can target the marginalised,

and over the last few years the UK government has enacted legislation to restrict protest, criminalise refugees and migrants, and prevent oversight and legal process for security services and the armed forces (Webber, 2022) – actions which fail to address systemic problems and instead target those responding to them.

What this suggests is that authoritarian neoliberalism, at least in nations similar to the UK, works as a *defensive formation*, it is ideologically effective when it defends those ‘higher up’ in class, racial and gendered hierarchies against perceived threats to their relative power. In the case of the housing crisis, the government and its supporters attempted to push through further neoliberal planning reforms by constructing an ‘enemy’ of some of their core supporters – which only exposed the divisions within their parties support and the historical bloc. What this paper highlights then, is the difficulties states face in delivering continuity neoliberalism, in large part due to the divisions and inequalities generated through neoliberal rule.

The failure of the white paper to become legislation is also not the end of the story. Planning reforms which reduce democratic deliberation and accountability, and which extend the states coercive power, continue to offer a quick policy fix for politicians which does not meaningfully challenge finance or developer capital and their role in driving up property prices and rents. Such reforms also require little public investment, in fact they dovetail neatly with ‘austrian realism’ (Davies et al., 2020) and the decimation of local authorities – for example, by blaming increased delays on deliberation rather than significant resource cuts. Even though these set of reforms failed, they have shifted the common sense of mainstream politics, which is reflected in the demands of ‘YIMBY’ groups and the Labour party’s rhetoric towards planning. The Conservative party may not be able to deliver the vengeance

(Davies, 2016) against the ‘NIMBY’ – but Labour look happy to make use of this populist distinction to support their reforms, and to avoid addressing sclerotic rentierism or committing to public investment. And this is how the populist distinction ‘sabotages accountability’ – it encourages anger at those with marginal power rather than the landowners, landlords, developers and politicians who benefit from and reproduce the present system.

There will have to be *some* way out of the present stasis, and all the present government appear to have left is reviving policies once advocated by the fascist National Front – ‘British homes for British workers’ (Stacey, 2024) – redirecting authoritarian populism to its typical targets. Within the stasis, asset owners of all kinds continue to benefit, but as the various YIMBY groups and thinktanks express, it is not working for younger workers, and the intellectuals representing the professional class fraction in the political arena have focused in on planning liberalisation as the means of reproducing the historical bloc – the property-owning democracy. Amongst all of the civil society contestation the rentier capital continues to flow, quietly, upstream.

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Notes

1. I say 'older' specifically, as this is the caricature of the NIMBY, but also because older people are much more likely to vote (which political parties care about!) and own their homes outright, and therefore the issue is framed as inter-generational.
2. 'Brickies' is a colloquial term for construction workers.

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